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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER)

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SUBJECT: DON'T STOP TIL YOU GET ENOUGH: OVERFISHING,
LIMITED CAPACITY PLAGUE SL WATERS

¶1. Summary: Fishing is a huge potential source of revenue for Sierra Leone, as well as the primary source of protein for the population, yet the sector remains under-developed. The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) estimates that the country loses at least \$30 million in revenue per year to illegal and unreported fishing. This illicit activity, combined with the exploitation of fish stocks and the lack of land-based infrastructure for processing and export, combine to hamstring the sector. Sierra Leonean fisheries are divided into industrial and artisanal sub-sectors. Sierra Leone's territorial waters are rich fishing grounds for a wide variety of fish and shellfish, including high-value species such as shrimp, lobster, cuttlefish, bream and snapper. Despite the potential bounty, Sierra Leone struggles to carve out a place in the lucrative export market, and the majority of fisheries revenue ends up in the hands of both legal and illegal foreign fishing companies. End Summary.

Industrial Sector

¶2. Industrial fishing is deep open-water fishing, and the multinational fleets can include trawlers, shrimpers, long liners, canoe support vessels, and carriers. The vessels are almost exclusively foreign-owned and operate in joint-venture arrangements with Sierra Leoneans: only the Sierra Fishing Company, majority held by a Sierra Leonean/Lebanese family, owns a portion of its own fleet. Approximately ten Sierra Leonean "agents" assist the foreign vessels in acquiring the necessary licenses and following the legal requirements for operation. The largest venture, the Okey Agency, currently operates 18 vessels, all foreign-owned by Chinese and Korean entities.

¶3. Industrial fish production has ranged from 185,000 tons in the pre-war period to 11,000 tons during the war in 1997. The subsector was severely impacted by the conflict, and the number of licensed vessels has never fully recovered. Foreign companies who partner with Sierra Leoneans to operate must pay for a license, available for 1, 6, or 12 months, which is scaled according to weight of vessels. They are also required to employ 65% African staff. The Sierra Leonean entity will buy whole fish or shellfish from the foreign catch, and then sell it in local markets.

¶4. Sierra Leone does not have a dedicated fishing harbor. The Freetown port facility is the only public deep-water port and pier, and industrial trawlers can use the quays for an hourly fee. Security at and around the port area is insufficient to secure the safety of cargo. Most companies choose to avoid this danger, as well as the pier fee and transport costs, and instead unload their catch from anchored trawlers using small boats. This is a dangerous, time-intensive process that cannot happen in high seas or heavy rain. Currently, only one company, Sierra Fishing, has any on-shore processing capability, and the company also has its own pier. Since Freetown does not have 24-hour power, companies must run

generators to refrigerate fish overnight. Due to this almost total lack of adequate cold storage and processing infrastructure, foreign trawlers only bring the minimum required percentage of catch ashore (Note: The Ministry of Marine Resources sets these percentages, which vary by species. End Note), and the rest is processed aboard the vessels for transshipment.

¶5. The industrial sub-sector is focused on export (approximately 1,800 tons of fish exports were reported in 2007), but Sierra Leonean companies are obviously constrained by their inability to store and process fish ashore. In addition, Sierra Leone is not currently certified to export into the lucrative EU market. The EU has given the GoSL permission to conduct the required safety certification, but the Ministry of Marine Resources states that it does not have the funds to perform the certification. The Sierra Fishing Company offered to make this process a private-public partnership, and fund the certification. Multiple companies expressed hope that Sierra Leone may have an EU certification number by late fall, 2009.

¶6. Unlicensed foreign vessels operate relatively freely in Sierra Leonean waters. There is currently no Vessel Monitoring System or other surveillance technology in place, and no air assets to assist with maritime domain awareness. The Maritime Wing (MW) of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces has three cutters gifted from the USCG and one gifted Chinese riverine frigate. The cutters are not blue water capable (maximum 4 days at sea) and the frigate (maximum 5 days at sea) cannot operate in high seas due to stability concerns. The MW does not conduct regular patrols of the EEZ.

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Lacking adequate platforms, fuel, and trained personnel, the MW will send a vessel far offshore only about once a month. These excursions are easily detected and avoided by foreign vessels with sophisticated radar technology.

Artisanal Sector

¶7. Artisanal fishermen use small boats and canoes to operate in coastal waters up to a depth of 15-45 meters, and in estuaries. An estimated 18,000 fishermen bring in an annual average catch of between 40,000 and 53,000 tons. Sierra Leonean fishermen belong to two main unions: the Sierra Leone Artisanal Fishermen's Union and the Sierra Leone Amalgamated Artisanal Fishermen's Union. The fish caught are mainly pelagic and are intended for local consumption, with only 10% exported. Fishermen report that a locally built boat of 12,x5, is capable of adequately supporting up to 200 individuals. The artisanal sector did not experience a significant drop in production during the war years. Artisanal fishing in inland waters is relatively low intensity, and does not nearly begin to capture the potential sustainable annual yield, which could be as high as 40,000 tons.

¶8. The artisanal sector contributes significantly to the exploitation of some species of the fish stock. There is widespread use of harmful fishing methods, including illegal small-mesh size nets that capture and kill immature fish and protected species. Fishing communities use shoreline mangroves as construction material and fuel for cooking and fish smoking, not realizing that these mangroves provide both a nursery ground and important nutrients to young fish. Artisanal fishermen report being forced to travel increasingly farther distances in search of mature, profitable fish stock. The increased distances are both expensive and dangerous: fuel and labor costs are positively correlated to distance, and Sierra Leone has no developed search and rescue mechanism.

Further Concerns

¶9. As previously noted, search and rescue capability is extremely limited in Sierra Leone. The MW is responsible for responding to distress calls, but industrial and artisanal fisherman are well aware that they are operating at their own risk in Sierra Leonean waters. Even if a vessel does have the technology to alert someone ashore of the need for help, mobilizing a MW asset to respond can take many hours. The slow response time and lack of a vessel tracking system combine to virtually ensure that the MW will arrive on the scene too late, if at all.

¶10. Piracy is a growing concern in Sierra Leone, particularly in the northern maritime areas. Foreign trawlers have been attacked and robbed of both their catch and personal effects. Most of the pirates are reported to be from Guinea. In December 2008, the MW met with the Vice Admiral of the Guinean Navy to discuss this issue, but incidents continue to occur. The MW would like to be able to conduct joint patrols with Liberia and Guinea, but to date this has not occurred due to a variety of reasons.

Comment

¶11. The struggles within the fisheries sector highlight a lack of maritime capacity that is not only preventing foreign direct investment and hampering economic development, but also contributing to the fragility of security in Sierra Leone. Without adequate maritime domain awareness and response capacity, the GoSL Leone has no way to control the flow of people and goods - both legal and illicit - in and out of the country. As Post has previously reported, Sierra Leone is a vulnerable transshipment country for narcotics, arms, and people. Supporting fisheries sector development, to include modernization of port facilities and port security, as well as surveillance and response training for the MW, will allow the sector to bring much-needed revenue into the country. It will also increase the GoSL's capacity to monitor and control activity within their land and sea borders. End Comment.
FEDZER